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ABSTRACT

Only one Pittsburgh television station (WPXI) chose to show the entire event when R. Budd Dwyer, Pennsylvania state treasurer, shot himself at a televised news conference. Within 12 hours, the focus of the story had shifted from Dwyer himself to the media's coverage. Was WPXI wrong to show the suicide? Were the other stations wrong to curtail the public's right to know? On an "Action News Special Report" news editors reasoned that showing the suicide was too gruesome, too graphic, served no purpose, and that the audience did not want to see it. "Pittsburgh 2Day," a locally-produced talk show, devoted its entire hour to media coverage of the suicide. Media persons on the show questioned whether it was right to "manage" the news. A telephone poll of viewers revealed that 46% felt the entire suicide should have been shown and 54% felt it should not. WPXI's decision not to participate in "Pittsburgh 2Day" lessened the effectiveness of the discussion and led people to conclude that WPXI staff regretted having shown the suicide. The media missed an opportunity to address the larger issue of the need for differing points of view in a democracy. The next time such a controversial event happens, each Pittsburgh station will probably make the same decision as the others regarding proper coverage. (Twelve figures are included.) (MHC)

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# HOW FAR DO YOU GO AND HOW MUCH DO YOU SHOW:
# PITTSBURGH TELEVISION NEWS MEDIA AND THE R. BUDD DWYER SUICIDE

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R. Budd Dwyer, Pennsylvania State Treasurer, committed suicide at a news conference on January 22, 1987. Friends and reporters believed that Dwyer had set up the news conference to resign his position and perhaps to attack Governor Richard Thornburgh whom he blamed for his prosecution. Dwyer, the next day, was to be sentenced for racketeering and federal mail fraud for his part in the Computer Technology Associates scandal. Dwyer had asked for a presidential pardon; he also had hoped that his conviction might be overturned. Neither seemed likely. Dwyer read for 21 minutes, most of the time asserting his innocence. After reading and summarizing 19 pages of the document, Dwyer told the reporters that his last page would later be available from his press aide who had been given the sealed document.[1] Dwyer then gave three envelopes to his aides: the first contained a letter to Governor Robert Casey requesting that his wife be allowed to fill out his term, the second, an organ donor's card, and the third, his funeral instructions. Dwyer then pulled a .357 magnum revolver from another large envelope, brought the barrel of the gun to his mouth and shot himself (Roddy A1-A7).

The suicide occurred at 11:00 AM E.S.T. Within minutes of Dwyer's death, the videotaped pictures of the events leading up to the suicide and the suicide itself were sent via satellite to the networks and the major stations in the state. On its news at noon, NBC affilate Channel 11 in Pittsburgh, WPXI, showed the

actual suicide after warning its viewers: "If you are at all squeamish, we advise you not to watch." The statement further advised viewers to "get all your kids into another room." (Bianco and Guggenheim A6) Dwyer was shown finishing his statement, raising a gun to his mouth, and then shooting it. (see figures 1-10). Channel 11's news director, Michael Sechrist, was not in town. The acting news director was By Williams, the station's news operation manager. Conflicting reports make it difficult to assess who actually made the decision to show the entire suicide. The PITTSBURGH PRESS, in a feature story on the media coverage, suggested that Williams made the decision himself (Bianco and Guggenheim A6). UPI, however, quoted WPXI news assistant Andrea King: "The news director, executive producer and producer of the program made the difficult decision to go with the facts . . . the editorial decision was made only after considerable thought." ("Treasurer's Suicide" 11) With the exception of the weather forecast (a major winter storm was approaching Pittsburgh), the entire thirty minute newscast was devoted to the Dwyer story. As Williams later stated: "we have seen something we've never seen in the state . . . we actually tried to give dignity to the story."(Bianco and Guggenheim A6) As might be expected, viewers complained about their coverage of the suicide. Williams said that 42 calls were received during the noon news, most of which were negative (Bianco and Guggenheim A6). The two other network

affiliates in Pittsburgh chose not to show the actual suicide. KDKA, a CBS affiliate, and WTAE, an ABC affiliate, both showed Dwyer waving the gun. Both stations, however, cut away before Dwyer put the gun to his mouth. Jim Esser, KDKA's acting news director, said that showing it "served no purpose whatsoever" while their noon news anchor, Patti Burns, claimed that "it was too horrible to show." WTAE News Director Joe Rovito later said that the decision was an "easy" gut judgment: "I just think it's in bad taste. I think it's too gruesome to show on TV." (Bianco and Guggenheim A6) Across the state of Pennsylvania only two other stations showed the suicide in its entirety. WHTM in Harrisburg broke into regular programming and showed the complete suicide. WPVI in Philadelphia, like WPXI, showed the suicide on its noon news. Of the television stations in the state which chose not to show the actual suicide, the most common justification for not showing the suicide was that it was too graphic and "they were convinced their audience did not want to see it." (Zanot and Nash 7)[2]

Although the suicide story dominated the six PM newscasts on each of the stations, none of them chose to show the suicide. WPXI carried the action to the point where Dwyer waves the gun before shooting himself, freezing the image, but allowing the sound track to continue.(see figure 11) Anchor Mike Hambrick warned the viewers that the tape was "graphic." Reporter Stu Brown, who had filed the noon report from Harrisburg, again

described what had happened. Part of his report included a short piece on Dwyer's executive secretary, Anne Stein. Stein is shown walking away from the camera sometime after the suicide. The following shot shows her crying at a table while another woman tries to console her.(see figure 12) Next she is shown being interviewed prior to the suicide. The first shot of Stein crying is disturbing -- clearly, the woman's privacy has been invaded. Channels 2 and 4, with more time at their disposal (both stations' six PM newscasts ran 60 minutes, WPXI had only 30 minutes), provided more background to the story. Just prior to 6:00 PM, Channel 2 "teased" the viewers after the "Jeopardy" credits (the show that was on prior to its 6 PM news) by showing Dwyer with the gun in his hand as anchor Ray Tannehill previewed the story. At the beginning of the newscast, Tannehill introduced the story by telling viewers that:

> Cameras were rolling on Dwyer as he put a .357 magnum revolver into his mouth and squeezed the trigger. Although KDKA's television cameras recorded it, we are not going to show the actual shooting certainly out of respect for the family of Bud Dwyer. Because, believe me when I tell you this, it was just awful to see. None-the-less, what you are about to see is very powerful and we certainly advise discretion.

Tannehill then went to Dave Sollenberger, KDKA's Harrisburg correspondent, who had witnessed the tragedy. Sollenberger

narrated the events leading up to the suicide; the videotape of Dwyer was stopped prior to his putting the gun to his mouth. Sollenberger then shifted to reactions to the shooting.

The evening network newscasts also covered the story. Dan Rather on the "CBS Evening News" read only three sentences as Dwyer's picture partially filled the screen. ABC and Peter Jennings treated the story in a very similar manner. ABC News spokeswoman Elise Adde later said that the sequence was "entirely too graphic." (Bianco and Guggenheim 6) NBC showed a short clip of the news conference and then an even shorter clip of Dwyer's body being carried out. (The second clip, which I did not see any other station or network use, was an odd choice -- Dwyer's dead body being removed from the room certainly did not contribute very much to our understanding of the story.) Despite this sequence, NBC spokesman Andrew Freedman justified the network's not showing the suicide by stating: "We feel it is too unsettling for our viewers."("Action News") And finally, Cable News Network spokswoman Judi Borza argued that "you can tell the story without showing the shooting." ("Action News")

The 11 PM news programs were similar to the earlier broadcasts except that the stories were shortened. Despite the fact that WPXI did not show the suicide on its 6PM newscast and neither had shown it earlier, both KDKA and WTAE both stressed that they were not going to show the tape of the suicide. While it would not become obvious until 11:30 that evening, the

story's focus was shifting from the life and death of Budd Dwyer to the local television coverage of his suicide, from Dwyer to the media.

At 11:30 PM, immediately following its 11:00 PM news, WTAE presented an "Action News Special Report" on the R. Budd Dwyer suicide. The program, however did not deal with the suicide, itself. Rather, the program spent all of its sixteen minutes looking at local television coverage of the suicide. Don Cannon, the station's number one anchor, and Sally Wiggin, weekend and sometimes daily anchor, with some help from Ed Tyll, a WTAE radio talk show host, discussed the ethics of WPXI's decision to show the suicide on its noon newscast. Sally Wiggin began with justifications from the local stations and the networks as to why they had chosen not to show Dwyer actually shooting the gun. Cannon's opening remarks seemed to suggest an open-mindedness toward the question: "No one can be really sure if it is right or wrong to show the actual shooting." Ed Tyll then noted that most of his callers disagreed with WPXI's decision to show the suicide. Tyll, perhaps in his role as talk-show "devil's advocate," argued that maybe the public ought to be able to see the suicide. A phone caller then supported him. Cannon, abandoning his earlier open-mindedness, quickly became defensive: "We can show you horrible things that happen every day. Out of a sense of responsibility, we don't show you." Tyll's response in the form of a question, "who makes the

decision," pointed to a discussion of the various gatekeepers involved in the decision-making process. Cannon started to develop the point, "we make editorial judgment every day," then abandoned it in favor of an assertion of the correctness of their decision: "we did, and KDKA did, the right thing." Tyll, perhaps because of the argumentative nature of most talk-show hosts, raised the obvious "free-marketplace of ideas" question: "Do we have the right to see it ?" Cannon, Wiggin, and a number of callers pointed to the potential harm that might be done to certain types of individuals to which Tyll responded that "you could turn off the dial." Cannon then attempted to explain the problem of decision-making without clear-cut guidelines: "There is nothing in the First Amendment or Journalism 101 or 102 that tells us exactly what should be done in a case like this." Tyll's populist response, ". . . a handful decide for the many," seemed to further Cannon's defensiveness: "It was not a handful . . . It was not an elitist, impudent snob decision." Cannon, by invoking the media attacks of Spiro Agnew, raised an issue probably very few viewers had even thought about. (Combined with his almost-aggressive non-verbal behavior, Don Cannon probably lost credibility with at least the "he doth protest too much" viewer.) The program did raise questions about the decision-making process surrounding such an event. It did not, whether owing to time constraints or the medium's general problem of covering itself, achieve very much

depth. Upon repeated viewing, the program seems to be as much a justification for WTAE's decision not to show the suicide as an exploration of the issues involved in that decision-making process.

The next afternoon, KDKA devoted all of its one-hour, locally-produced talk show, PITTSBURGH 2DAY, to local media coverage of the Budd Dwyer suicide. The program was hosted by Patrice King Brown and John Cigna, who substituted for regular co-host John Burnett. Cigna, part of the morning news and entertainment team on KDKA-AM radio, had worked for many years as one of that station's evening talk-show hosts. Interestingly, his position in the discussion/debate was quite similar to the one taken by Ed Tyll in WTAE's special broadcast. The program asked the question "should Dwyer's suicide have been carried in its entirety ?" After Brown showed a tape of the beginning of the previous day's noon news on KDKA with Patti Burns as anchor, Brown invited the various representatives of local media to discuss the question. Viewers were asked to phone-in a "yes" or "no" to the question and perhaps make comments to panel. Discussing the question would be Jim Essor--KDKA-TV's acting news director, Joe Rovito--news director for WTAE-TV, Fred Honsberger--newscaster at KDKA-AM radio, and William Deibler--managing editor of Pittsburgh's morning newspaper, the PITTSBURGH POST GAZETTE. Brown noted that WPXI had been asked to send a representative but after a conference of top

management had chosen not to discuss it any further. The PITTSBURGH PRESS, the city's afternoon paper, was unable to send anyone who had been invoved in its decision-making. (The show would also show clips from other controversial television broadcasts -- the Challenger crash, the traffic copter crash -- as it went to commercial breaks.) Each of the media representatives was first asked about how they chose to handle the suicide. Acting news director Essor said that he did not decide until he saw the video. He went into it "with an open mind." He "knew instantly" when Dwyer started to move the gun toward himself. News director Rovito admitted that he decided before he saw the video. It was "not appropriate, not necessary." Honsberger said that it was his decision for the radio station to run the audio tape unedited. Deibler said that the newspaper would cover the story completely but with "good taste." John Cigna, as Ed Tyll had done the night before, then raised the question of the public's right to see the suicide: "The first thing that comes to mind is "are we managing the news ?" Doesn't the public have a right to know, a right to see ?" Esser chose not to avoid or deny the point as Don Cannon had done the night before. Yes, he responded, they were managing the news, but so was Dwyer when he chose the news conference for his suicide. Showing the actual suicide would serve "no purpose." After a commercial break, Cigna continued his argument: "Why shouldn't they see it ? . . . The public

should be given the choice. Get the kids out of the room." Rovito pointed out how it was "not practical." Co-host Brown then went to an audience member who watched the suicide but thought that showing it was unnecessary. A telephone caller commented that it frightened her but that she was glad that she saw it. Cigna then asked the panel about their decisions on the Challenger disaster and the attempted assassination of President Reagan. Rovito admitted to showing them but then noted that "there are no clear standards. It is strictly a judgment call." While Rovito appeared open-minded, his counterpart at KDKA seemed a bit more dogmatic; Esser told about how he called the network to urge them to not show the actual suicide and why they, the network, should notify KDKA prior to the news if they did. Honsberger noted that KDKA-TV's decision did not surprise him. He also expressed his own misgivings: "I'm really torn on this . . . If we start cutting this out . . . when are we going to stop ?" After a few more comments from the panel, audience, and phone-callers, the final results of the show's phone poll were announced: 398 or 46% voted "yes" the suicide should have been shown in its entirety to 438 or 54% who voted "no." The program, particularly when compared to WTAE's special report, did a reasonably good job of exploring the issues. The show would have more-than-likely been stronger had WPXI chosen to participate. John Cigna, however, did raise a number of appropriate issues. And for the most part, the news directors

avoided the self-righteousness that characterized WTAE's report on the controversy.

Coverage of the Dwyer suicide lessened with each succeeding newscast. While the letters to the editor section of local newspapers would keep the coverage debate alive a bit longer, the stations themselves appeared to lose interest in publicly debating the larger ethical questions. (WPXI, by refusing to participate in the debates, may have shortened the media life of the controversy.) While it is likely that the station's point of view was at least partially presented by the present and former talk show hosts, its obvious absence from the debates signified to most viewers that the station had come to realize that its decision was wrong. The decision by KDKA and WTAE not to show the actual suicide was--if nothing else--the more popular, if not the easier, position to take. The defense of their position, however, particularly its more self-righteous aspects, may further the elitism charges of some critics, as well as open them to charges of hypocrisy in their coverage of future controversial stories. To the extent that the debate, for the most part, focused on the sensational ("too horrible to show") rather than the larger questions of public access and the free-marketplace may present future problems for everyone. The newscasts and specials did raise questions about what is appropriate and what is sensational coverage of a news event. The stations, however, missed an opportunity to address the

larger issue of the need for differing voices and points of view in a democracy. They also failed to note, perhaps for economic reasons, that the viewer is still the final gatekeeper.

The answers by the Pittsburgh stations to the questions of "how far do you go" and "how much do you show" were different in terms of the coverage of the R. Budd Dwyer suicide. With a similar story sometime in the future, it seems to me unlikely that WPXI would make the same decision. Given the amount of bad publicity they received combined with the perception that a majority of the audience did not want to see the suicide, would seem to dictate against similar coverage. The rhetoric of the spokespersons for KDKA and WTAE will probably limit their options also. To show something as graphic, or nearly as graphic, as the Dwyer suicide would certainly invite charges of hypocricy, particularly since both stations seemed to go out of their way to criticize WPXI. The answers by the Pittsburgh stations to the questions "how far do you go" and "how much do you show" may not be all that different next time.

figure 1 - WPXI noon news

figure 2

figure 3

figure 4

figure 5

figure 6

figure 7

figure 8

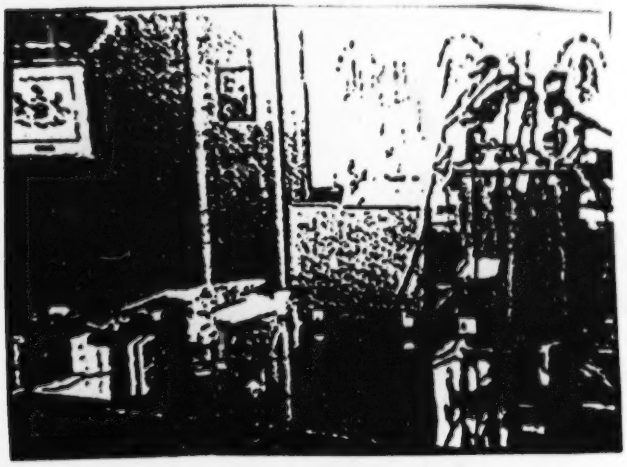

figure 9

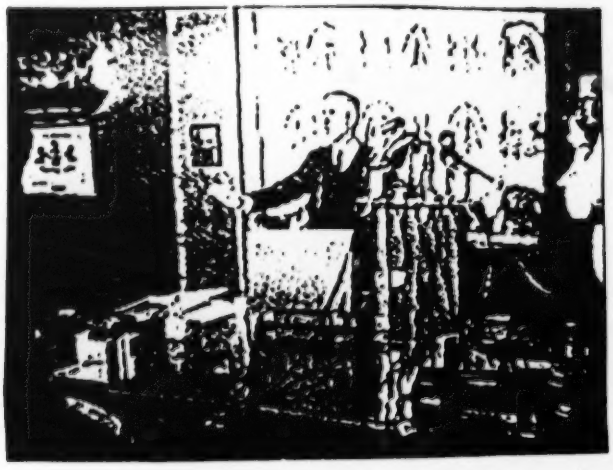

figure 10

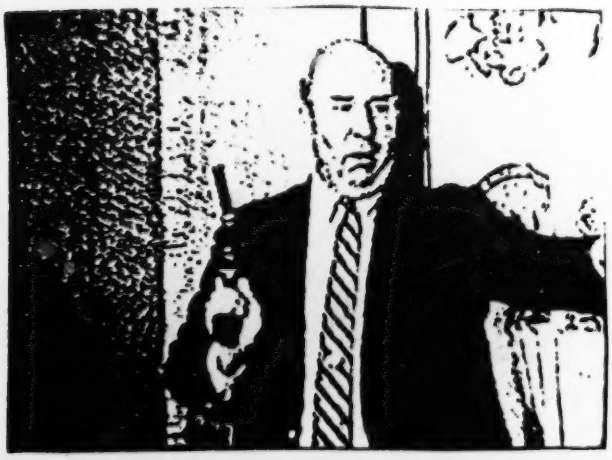

figure 11 - WPXI 6:00 news (the tape is stopped at this point)

figure 12

Notes

[1]The final page noted that he had previously promised reporters "the story of the decade." Dwyer once again asserted his innocence as he expressed the hope that his later actions would call attention to the injustice that he believed he had suffered:

> To those of you who are shallow the events of this morning will be that story. But to those of you with depth and concern the real story will be what I hope and pray results from this morning -- in the coming months and years, the development of a true justice system here in the United States. I am going to die in office in an effort to see if the shameful facts, spread out in all their shame, will not burn through our civic shamelessness and set fire to American pride. Please tell my story on every radio and television station and in every newspaper and magazine in the U.S. ("Goodbye" A7).

[2]Zanot and Nash surveyed television stations in Pennsylvania on their coverage of the Dwyer suicide. 16 of the 17 stations that did not show the entire suicide responded. (None that showed the suicide chose to respond.) "Making rapid decisions with no contact among them, the vast majority made similar decisions. And, as the study shows, later justification for these decisions centered on common expressions of professional standards and social responsibility." (Zanot and Nash 11)

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